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ABSTRACT

Conceptual encounter methodology has been used to investigate the experience of anger. With this method, investigators have attempted to construct an abstract structure that describes essential features of the experience being investigated. People are interviewed about concrete examples of the experience, given the abstract conceptualization, and asked to indicate in which cases the description fits and in which it does not. When the method was used in this study of the experience of anger, findings revealed that persons never reported simple frustration over not getting something they wanted. Rather, their experience was that something different should happen. People described what should be rather than just what they wanted. The "I want" of anger implies, "I should have it--and I am entitled to it." When adults talk about their experiences of anger, they frequently seek something for which to blame another, so that anger can occur. Children also use these constructions. (RH)

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The adult experience of anger: Implications for research on children

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People have been describing the adult experience of anger for a long time. Seneca made some interesting observations and, in 1918, Richardson described two different types of anger that might be termed "frustration" anger and "humiliation" anger.

My own investigations have used a method I call "conceptual encounter" (cf. de Rivera, 1981). In this method the investigator attempts to construct an abstract structure that describes the essential features of the experience that is being investigated. People are then interviewed about concrete examples of the experience, in this case, experiences of anger. These may be personal experiences that are recounted, or observations of an other's anger, or one may risk interrupting a person who is angry and ask about their experience, or one may interrupt one's self and examine the experience. In all cases, after concrete details have been described, the investigator shares the abstract conceptualization and asks the person who actually experienced the anger to indicate where the abstract description "fits" and where it does not fit. Thus the abstract conceptualization "encounters" the concrete experience. Some of these encounters are rather tame affairs, but often the conceptualization makes explicit what was only implicit in the experience, thus, enabling the experiencer to become aware of aspects of their experience that had gone unnoticed, thereby deepening the experience. And not infrequently, some aspect of the concrete experience will <u>not fit</u> and will thereby force the investigator to modify the conceptualization. The method is very

useful in forcing rapid theory development and, over time, the conceptualizations become more precise and interesting.

Now when we use this method what do we find out about the experience of anger? For one thing, we discover that persons never simply report being frustrated over not getting something they want. Often they are, in fact, not getting what they want, but they are never simply being frustrated nor losing control. Rather, what they experience is that something different should happen. Let me give you an example from a written protocol:

"At the beginning of this last module I decided to do well in my organic chemistry lab. This was prompted by the fact that I didn't do so well in the previous three modules. It's not that how I did in lab wasn't of concern to me before, just that it wasn't important enough to me to make me devote my fullest effort to it. I accepted it as a challenge, as a task. I did not foresee failure, I was confident I could do it. Implied in this task was the assertion: I do not fail at what I really try to do. The first lab of the module was a support to this assertion in that it was efficiently done and rather successful. There was one hitch though: I spilled some sulfuric acid on my hand at one point and suffered a minor burn. It was painless, but it made me angry. I felt a tension and a desire to smash one of the glass bleakers. This was associated with the thought, "This should not be happening!" (Note the "should")

"The next week I started a series of nine tests in identifying unknown compounds by indicating characteristic

chemical properties. That day I completed four tests moderately successfully and strengthened my confidence in the decision to do well. The following week I did the next four tests with little trouble. The last test, however, was marred by a minor disaster. This test consisted of slowly adding nitrous acid to a test tube containing an organic compound which was cooled in an ice bath. There were three different compounds in separate test tubes. Two of them behaved nicely. The third (quite comically in retrospect) started foaming madly and started to come out of the top of the test tube. Obviously I had either added the acid too fast or had not cooled it down enough. I tried to cool the test tube down some more by moving it around in the ice bath, but only managed to knock one of the other test tubes over, loosing its contents in the ice bath. Then I impulsively removed the troublesome test tube from the ice bath, propping it up against my lab towel. But it managed to fall over and spill its contents on the lab table. At that moment I was feeling my anger. I felt an incredible tension which seemed directed at holding back from shouting innumerable obscenities. I felt that what was happening shouldn't have been happening. I felt a strong desire to smash all of my glassware. I decided not to finish the experiment and started to clean up. While cleaning up I managed to break, unintentionally, two beakers. This didn't relieve my anger, though, because they merely broke, they didn't shatter. It didn't add to my anger either because I didn't care that I broke them."

In all the incidents I have examined I find people describing what should be, what ought to be, and not simply what they want.

The concept of ought has been analyzed by Heider (1958). The concept implies a force on behavior coming from a "suprapersonal objective order." What ought to exist is not simply what an individual wants to exist but is equivalent to what an accepted objective order wants to exist. The concept is related to the concept of value in that if an individual has a value, he believes that the objective order is so constituted that under certain conditions persons oughts to behave in certain ways. The concept of ought is also related to the concept of can in that we would not say that a person ought to do something if it is clearly impossible for him todo this. If p ought to do x it is implied that p can do x -- that p is a possible cause of x.

Heider also points out that since oughts are perceived as coming from an objective order they (and values) have the same status as a belief in what is real. Whereas another person may have likes and wants that are quite different from our own, if he has values or oughts that are different it is as upsetting as if he saw red where we see green. The mere fact of a value disagreement creates tension in an interpersonal relationship.

There are a number of other tensions connected with values and oughts which Heider has explicated. Often the mere fact that something exists suggests that it ought to exist, and we sometimes act as though what ought to exist actually did exist.

We feel that a person who does what he ought to do, ought to be happy, and the mere fact that somebody is unlucky is sometimes enough to convince us that he has done something he ought not to have done. While these pressures clearly exist it is not evident why they should exist. Lerner (1974) has suggested that the relations stem from basic contracts which the person makes as he or she becomes socialized.

When adults talk about their experiences of anger they don't just sound frustrated. They keep saying things such as, "he ought to have mentioned it," "he ought not to have held my political beliefs against me," "she ought to do the dishes". The "want" of anger is an I <u>should</u> have it -- and I am <u>entitled</u> to it. It is the imperative of an authority about what ought to be.

Now it is not only adults who use these constructions. Some years ago I had the opportunity to witness the angry explosion of a seven-year-old girl at a sled, which kept falling down no matter how it was propped up against a wall. Talking with her afterward I asked why she was angry and she patiently explained that the "darned old thing" wouldn't stay up. As she was talking a grin flitted across her face. I asked her why she had smiled and (after some "do tell me's") she stated, "Well, I <u>told</u> it to stay up -- I know it can't really do things, but I haven't had a thing I wanted all day long, so I told it to and it should have" -- and here she smiled again.

Remember the phrasing used in the first example I read....The student did not say, " I managed to knock over the test tube", but "it managed to fall over"! In short, he managed to blame the test tube. Given the intensity of his commitment the experiment should work. The relationship between anger and ought is extremely powerful. Many an adult catches him or her self desperately trying to find something he or she can blame some other for so that anger can occur. Without an ought they can not let themselves be angry. In such cases there appears to be a tension that would like to become anger but can't become anger until we can hold the other responsible for doing something that ought not to be done.

While this close connection between ought and anger may be granted in adults or obviously socialized seven-year-olds, but what of a two-year-old's anger or the 2-month-old's anger so cleverly revealed by the experiments described to us today by Michael Lewis and Joe Campos? It is one thing for a socialized person to be an authority figure and tell an object what to do and believe the other should obey, but what of a relatively unsocialized child or infant?

There seem to be at least two ways in which we might account for the relationship between anger and ought. John Lau (1989) has argued that when small children get mad they simply want something they can't get. Frustrated, they become "angry" only in the sense that they want to move against the frustrating other. However, in our culture we socialize their aggression.

We essentially teach them that you should only be angry when things ought to be different -- when an inter-subjective agreement has ben challenged. By the time you're a fully socialized adult you have to find a violated ought or can't let yourself be angry. It seems to me that Nancy Stein might also take this position.

Perhaps this position is valid, but I would like to explore the possibility that even the most primitive experiences of anger contain at least the vestiges of an assertion about what ought to exist. I postulate that the infants anger may be egocentric but it is still a claim conditioned on a feeling of entitlement. As the child develops these entitlements become more rational. Thus, even in children, it is not frustrated wants that lead to anger, but violated entitlements. And it is this anger that allows the infant, child, or adult to insist on what he or she wants. From this perspective, the "I want", "I insist on", is not the condition of anger but the response of anger. When children are asked why they are angry and they say, "because I want it," their reflection is based on their immediate experience of the anger rather than on the condition of that anger, which they have no easy way of verbalizing. If I am correct, then what we adults learn is not that we can only be angry when an ought has been violated but that we can only rationally assert an ought when there is an inter-subjective agreement.

While I have no experimental evidence for this position --

in fact, I hope that after this symposium we can think of some interesting experiments that might bear on this controversy -- I do have a few "field" observations. Fortune often smiles on us when we most need it, and shortly before I had to prepare this talk, a two year old moved into my house. I eagerly awaited instances of anger so that I could see what appeared to be going on. The first thing I discovered is that two years don't get nearly as angry as I had thought or remembered. It is their mothers who get angry. At last in my, admittedly small sample, the mother was angry about 10 times as frequently as her son. And it is understandable why. Authorities have all sorts of oughts that two year olds are often violating and need to learn. We certainly give them all sorts of opportunities to learn how oughts and anger go together.

Disappointed, I decided to provoke a little anger and, remembering the technique used by Joe Campos' and his collaborators, I gently placed my fingers around the little fellow's wrists so that he couldn't move his arms. After a few seconds he looked up at me with a quizical look on his face, sort of sighed, shrugged his shoulders, and settled back in his chair as though he didn't understand what was going on but would humor me. I didn't have the heart to continue. Finally, the following incident occurred:

Andrew (23 months) is sucking on an ice-cube. It falls on the floor. His Dad swiftly leans over and throws the (to him--dirty) cube in the sink. Andrew is upset, starts to cry, says

"ice" and looks and sounds a bit angry. His father gives him his own ice-cube but Andrew is still upset -- he doesn't even seem to notice he has an ice cube; he wants "my" ice cube. For most adults an ice-cube is an ice-cube, but for Andrew "my" cube is not the same as "Daddy's". I conjecture that possession conveys rights and that, for him, his beloved father has arbitrarily thrown away what was his, when he had done nothing bad to deserve this injury. Note, that if I am correct, an ought was violated.

Shortly after this incident, Andrew, still a little fragile and now sitting on his mother's lap, attempts to take some pieces of fruit from the fruit bowl. He is not ordinarily allowed to serve himself and in this incident his mother prevented him from doing so -- putting the fruit back into the bowl. Andrew says "some" but is not upset and does not get angry in spite of the fact that he obviously wanted the fruit and greedily ate it a minute later when his mother served him the fruit. I conjecture that the food was not yet in Andrew's possession, that he didn't really have a claim on it and knew he was not entitled to it.

Here is a reported incident:

Andrew is "helping" his mother make bread. He is suppose to be filling a cup with flour. His mother turns to get some water and Andrew dumps the partially filled (unmeasured) flour into the partly filled (and now unmeasurable) bowl. His mother impatiently corrects him and says, "look at me". Andrew refuses to do so. He is sent to the corner. Ordinarily he would go, albeit a bit protestingly, but in this circumstance -- with his

mother trying to control her impatience, he angrily refuses to go until she forces him to do so. I conjecture that Andrew senses her impatience and perceives her command as arbitrary and, hence, unjustified. Presented with an apparently arbitrary order he becomes angry and resists the command.

If the "want" of anger is not a wish or a hope, or even a desire, but an I should have it -- an I'm entitled to it -- then how do adults, two-year-olds, or two-month-olds, construct such relationships? How do they go about constructing oughts and how might we experimentally influence such constructions?

I believe that "oughts are established when we enter into a "unit" relationship with another person. We accept a responsibility by entering into a unit and we expect other to reciprocate -- we trust them and believe the other ought to behave in certain ways. If we meet another's eyes they may then ask us for a favor, if we accept a student into our class they have a right to make demands on our time, if we listen to a person we expect them to listen to us. By accepting responsibility and establishing the unit we make it possible for them to depend on us, and we ought to be able to depend on them. I believe these dynamics of dependency are related to those written about by Takeo Doi (1973) and described in his talk to us yesterday.

Now we also enter into units with activities -- we let ourselves be involved in solving a puzzle, eating a meal, writing a paper, listening to a talk, and -- once we are involved -- very

specific dynamics are set in play. For example, once we are involved we resist being interrupted, we press towards completion, and we become subject to certain satiation processes. These dynamics were the subject of a brilliant series of investigations by Kurt Lewin and his students at the University of Berlin (cf. de Rivera, 1976) and Lewin's title for these studies was "Investigations into will and emotion". What I want to suggest, is that adults, children, and infants only get angry when their <u>will</u> is thwarted, and willing something is not simply being attracted to something, wanting it, or controlling it, but <u>committing</u> one's self to the activity in such a manner that one ought to have it. The self accepts responsibility for the action and it is when the child experiences a challenge to what ought to exist that leads to anger and the demand that the other change.

In response to some questions from the audience and fellow panelists:

An "ought" is an emotional-cognitive form and not merely a cognitive "expectancy". While we sometimes use the term "expect" to mean "ought" -- as in, "I expect your paper will be in by Friday" -- an event that is merely unexpected is the occasion for surprise rather than anger.

I am postulating that oughts are contingent on what might be termed "affective acts". An example, would be Freud's description of giving up the pleasure principle for the reality principle. In this regard, the most primitive expression of anger appears to be the rage that an infant demonstrates when it is subjected to pain. From our perspective, this rage -- which is reflected in vasodilation, extension of the limbs, and yowling -- is a removal of the pain -- a thrusting away of something that the infant "decides" ought not to be. While obviously an infant does not have the complex network of social oughts that later develops, I believe that we are dealing here with a genuine ought and not simply a wish. The infant's will is clearly manifest and I suspect that this insistence -- that the pain shall not be -- is the root source of morality.

Since this paper was presented I had the opportunity to observe a 16 month old boy become angry when his mother carried him away from where he wanted to play. It appeared to me that the anger was sort of a "quasi-anger". I believe that dacial and vocal expression would have been coded as anger yet the "anger" was quite fleeting and the child's attention was easily redirected. It seemed to me almost as though the child were "trying out" anger but easily abandoned the project when it became clear that there were no grounds for his claim or, at least, that his claim was not going to receive any attention. From an adult perspective the mother had every right to take the child with her. From a symbolic - interactionist perspective the ought was not recognized by the significant other.

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